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ABSTRACT

Impressions of Atlantic City can be used as an interesting case study for a discussion of the notion of a learning society and its survival in a policy-driven system like Sweden's and a market-influenced context such as Atlantic City. It would be interesting to draw a map of the different learning support systems that are available in various countries. It is a great challenge to analyze to what extent different societal contexts in the family, at work or at leisure, stimulate the curiosity and search for new knowledge. A majority of workplaces do not seem designed to enhance learning on the job and instead have a "low competence ceiling" and few expectations of individual initiatives. One's images of a learning society are greatly affected by the ideas, values, and economic motivation of different cultural and political systems. Atlantic City is an extreme outpost of a market-driven system with a very narrow-minded curriculum. The shortages of that learning context could be used to point out the need for learning rights for citizens. Among the learning rights could be free choice of subject and learning mission (particularly relevant in the face of employer-sponsored adult education), paid educational leave, and the option of full-time studies without staking one's total financial situation and security, day care, and social support. (CML)

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NEXT STEP TOWARDS A LEARNING SOCIETY ? -

Impressions from the Boardwalk of Atlantic City

" I think we should name the new age.
I think of it as The Learning Society."

These words could also be used to describe the future as we see it. It is interesting to observe, however, that they were said thirty years ago by dean Paul McGhee from the New York University at a conference at Michigan State University. It was at a time when the computerization of the educational landscape was just a newborn baby. It was at a time when the media-domination of our societies had just started the transition of new ways of constructing our social realities. And it was at a time when the volume and variety of adult learning was far behind current times.

So where are we today? And what are our missions for tomorrow? What conceptual and empirical evidences are necessary if we want to claim that we are taking the next step towards a learning society? As a foreign observer, I must give tribute to the AAACE and the New Jersey Association for their choice of Atlantic City as a home for the annual conference of 1989.

What a fascinating illustration of how far a learning society could move out into the hands of the market! And what a dynamic illustration of the demographic depression in the USA seeing all these mainly older people at the more than 18.000 slot machines so deeply occupied by their dreams of a better future. The daily invasion of gamblers with or without professional recognition needs more than 1.300 buses, not to mention all limousines, taxis etc. And in addition to the need for meaningful adult learning among the public, Atlantic City could also be taken as a case for the rapidly expanding growth of the service sector.

The new casino buildings are built almost to the egde of the land to make place for new money-producing - or better money-consuming machines. It's a development mainly on market conditions and with a weak interest in developing the necessary infrastructure at city level.

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Most of you might have read about this development in Time Magazine, Sept 25 (very Time-ly for the conference!) and I quote Thomas Carver, President of the Casino Association of New Jersey:

" People see the contrast between the facilities we've put up and the rest of the town, and they think ' What happened? Why did these bastards not do what they were supposed to do?' The fact is, we did. We came here to produce the money, not to run the city."

At the time of the AAACE-conference, I read that senator Richard Codey wanted to introduce a legislation to put a three year moratorium on new casinos in order to restore the infrastructure of Atlantic City:

" It is time to really focus on the airport, convention hall, the beach and Boardwalk, housing and a number of other problems that have kept the city from developing into a first-class resort,"

For me, the impressions of Atlantic City could be used as an interesting case study for a discussion of the notion of a learning society and its survival in a policy-driven system like Sweden and a market-influenced context like Atlantic City.

Is there an infrastructure of a learning society?

Comparative studies of adult learning in different countries could be developed from different goals and with various methodological sophistication. Firstly, we could describe the goals, provision of programs and content and student population of different institutions of adult education. With this traditional approach in mind it is no surprise to see how adult learning in many countries is moving out on the workplace in the form of corporate classrooms or learning organizations.

This is a development, that causes people in many quarters to raise their voices for a stronger civic component in adult education and learning. This is also true for Sweden, where a broad provision of study circles and folk high school courses have been a guarantee for civic knowledge and liberal studies.

Secondly, it would be interesting to draw a map of the different "learning-supportive systems", that are available in various countries, such as educational leave of absence and study assistance, information and guidance, day-care centers for adults with families and parental leave, libraries, computers, video equipment and other facilities to be used to enhance options for adult learning. What instruments are created in order to increase options not only for work-related studies, but also for the sake of civic participation and personal fullfilment.

Finally, it is a great challenge to analyze to what extent different societal contexts in the family, at work or leisure stimulate the curiosity and search for new knowledge. If we look at different workplaces, a majority of them do not seem to be designed in order to enhance learning on the job. They have, on the contrary a <u>low competence ceiling</u> and few expectations of individual initiatives relating to a search for new knowledge and skill. Thus, the notion of learning organizations might in some cases be more utopian than the idea of a learning society.

In a more general sense, the societal transformation has resulted in a new division of labor between the individual and the family on the one hand and the public sector on the other. There are a great number of personal activities that have been institutionalized and taken care of by organizations or societal agents. I am not in favor of the opinion, however, that modernization as such reduces all kinds of self-directed learning projects among citizens. There are indeed, a growing number of challenges relating to peace, environment, schooling, media and communication that call for new initiatives among the public and the individual citizen.

<u>Atlantic City as an island of a learning society</u>

It is not possible to give an accurate description of Atlantic City on its way to a learning society after a couple of days' visit. I am more directed by my impressions than pure and systematically collected empirical evidence. Still, I think that any kind of reflection has to start from impressions before getting lost into the more systematic tunnel of empirical research.

It seems that there is a lot of informal and incidential learning taking place both among small and big gamblers. I saw convincing signs of self-made competence in the faces of many old female gamblers. Some of them seemed to be almost remarried to their so rich one-armed bandits, when they were sitting and waiting for the sweet sound of new cash. If you wanted to learn in a more systematic way and not lose too much experience from trial and error. Channel Two at the Tropworld Hotel could give you further instructions.

The service personnel only got one week of supervision and information before going to work. If you wanted to be a dealer, you had to pay at least $ 500 for the first course. I did not get any opportunity to check what kind of education or training that was provided for people at the management level, but an informed guess is that it would not be difficult to find a number of customized higher education programs even in this sector of life. In addition to the money-producing industry, cafeterias, restaurants and hotels seemed to be the core of the production system in Atlantic City. Some of the new casinos had met strong difficulties in recruiting competent staff.

On my way to the railway station I saw an old brown house with the letters Casino School on the front wall. My first-hand association was that it looked like a small prison. And not surprisingly, security and control seemed to be a hidden curriculum in A.C.

So what is then my point in relation to a new market for a learning society? It is indeed a very simple conclusion: Our images of a learning society is to a great extent affected by the ideas, values and economic motivation of different cultural and political systems. Atlantic City is for some people, myself included, an extreme outpost of a market-driven system with a very narrow-minded curriculum. And just because of that, it turns out to be an excellent case for a study on different aspects of a learning society. To see the shortages of this learning context could also be used to raise the need of learning rights for citizens of our societies.

A bill of learning rights for the next century?

The notion of a learning society cannot only be assessed in relation to the volume of adult learning taking place. It is also necessary to focus on the quality of learning as well as the balance between civic issues, formal schooling and occupational training and up-grading. In one of the sessions at the AAACE-conference, David Stewart, ACE, raised the need for a bill of learning rights for the USA. I found his ideas to be highly relevant.

It would be a challenging outcome of comparative ventures if we not only compare our systems of adult learning, but also influence the policy debate in different countries on what kind of learning that is most needed for the future.

One learning right could focus on a free choice of subject and learning mission. This is of the utmost importance in the context of a rapidly expanding employers sponsored adult education. Another right, which calls for a number of strong policy interventions, concerns paid educational leave and the options of full-time studies without staking one's total financial situation and security.

Thirdly, adults ought to have the right to day-care and social support in a form that does not impinge on a too limited time for free learning. Fourthly, each adult student should have the right to being treated as an adult with knowledge, experience and a number of civic responsibilities. Fifthly, adult learners should also get accurate and individualized information and guidance if they want to embark on a longer study project.

These rights are just examples that have to be developed further and tested in different policy contexts. In a broader sense, it is a question of what time-policies we need to meet the needs of the future learning society. In the last years, an intensive policy debate has taken place in Sweden concerning these issues.

The Swedish parliament recently made a decision to extend parental leave up to 18 months. As a parent you will also get up to 60 days paid leave to take care of sick children. General vacation will be changed from five weeks for all employees to six weeks. A law concerning educational leave was taken in the Parliament in the mid-seventies. It is still an open issue, however, if any further steps will be

taken in the anticipated future to increase paid learning time for individuals.

Yet there is no strong policy force in favor of the accumulation of learning time through the life span. And it does not seem to be a high priority among the citizens. A recent Swedish study showed that only 3% of the Swedish population wanted to use a shortened working time for learning, while 33% said "family" instead. When asked about how they would use more time off the job, women gave priority to longer parental leave and men wanted more vacation!

The winds and waves from the past to future

I fully admit that I have been somewhat unfair to Atlantic City. It is indeed beautifully situated close to the sea and the boardwalk was a nice place for a morning run for a Swedish bureaucrat, who each day in Sweden walks almost a mile within the National Board of Education. I did not see so much interest in the sea - all eyes were oriented towards the casinos and not the nice and sandy waterfront.

I still hear through my open window the winds and the waves from the sea playing with the sand in early morning hours (somewhat later in Swedish time!). I also remember the vast cafeterias with old people just sitting and waiting for the buses to take them back to reality. Walking from the large and noisy casino halls to these very silent waiting rooms felt like being part of a Fellini movie or a modernized version of Dante's Divina Comedia.

And in my mind I also see the old black lady at the railway station saying to the staff " Could you please help me to fil in this form. My husband died in May this year..". The fact that my train for Washington would leave within five minutes and I had to wait for her to be helped in writing, made this image of illiteracy even more vivid and stressing. Thus, my last impression of Atlantic City happened to be one of the back-side of society- adult illiteracy and the great challenges of the learning society.